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The Eucharistic Cosmology of Teilhard de Chardin

A creative renewal of metaphysical conceptions of eucharistic consecration in the face of dominant models based on ecclesial community has the potential to make a valuable contribution to mission and spirituality by relating the eucharist to the active lives of lay people within the church and outside it. This is a possibility for many churches and not just those with a catholic liturgical tradition. The Jesuit theologian and palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin develops a suggestive eucharistic theology as part of a cosmological vision in which the whole of creation is ultimately dependent on the transforming power of the eucharist. The antecedents of this theology are to be found in the philosophy of Gottfried Leibniz and Maurice Blondel, and it has clear affinities with Gregory of Nyssa's eucharistic imagery. Fundamental to it are the notions of sacred space, incarnation and transfiguration.

Origins in Leibniz and Blondel

Beginning in 1706, Gottfried Leibniz undertook a lengthy correspondence with Bartholomaeus des Bosses, a Jesuit scholar, which continued until Leibniz's death in 1716. The primary object of their exchange was for Leibniz to develop a better philosophical understanding of the nature of transubstantiation. This he sought to do by considering how the individual particles, or monads, which make up the elements of bread and wine are recomposed in the eucharist into the body of Christ. He writes to Des Bosses:

I should think that your theory of transubstantiation can be explained by retaining the monads, which seem to fit the reason and order of the universe perfectly, but with a bond of substance added by God to unite the body of Christ to the monads of bread and wine, and the former bond of substance destroyed, and its modifications and accidents with it. Thus there would remain only the phenomena of the monads of bread and wine, which would have been there if no bond of substance had been added by God to these monads.¹

Although Leibniz, being a Lutheran, expresses his belief in the doctrine of the real presence², his attitude to transubstantiation remains ambivalent. He had stated in a letter to Antoine Arnauld that the doctrines of transubstantiation and real presence are ultimately identical, and speculated to Des Bosses that the only way of accounting for the mystery of the incarnation is with reference to 'real bonds or unions'.³

The renowned catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel considered Leibniz's theory of the bond of substance to be relevant not only to an understanding of eucharistic consecration but to the whole of cosmology. He contends:

Despite so much effort to make with his bond a superior being, a vivifier, a single explanation, Leibniz brought forth ... something simultaneously extrinsic and dependent; whereas he needed to produce *a transcendence immanent to all that it causes*, animates and binds together from the inside, a sort of form of goodness and perfection. He thus falls again under the conceptual yoke that he has wished and believed himself to have surpassed, although still remains halfway to liberation.⁴

The implications of the theory of the bond of substance extend, Blondel argues, far beyond the eucharist: 'It is thus nature in its entirety and the whole of metaphysics that is called into question by the theory.'⁵

Consecration

During the autumn of 1919, Teilhard deschaux despatched a selection of his wartime writings to Blondel for advice and comments. Blondel stated in his response:

The question raised by Leibniz and Des Bosses concerning transubstantiation during the Eucharist leads us to conceive of Christ ... as the bond which makes substantiation possible, the vivifying agent for all creation: the bond of perfection.⁶

This letter establishes a crucial link between Teilhard's eucharistic cosmology, Leibniz's theory of the bond of substance in the eucharist, and Blondel's discussion of its wider metaphysical implications. Leibniz and Blondel inspire Teilhard's description of the eucharist, in which Christ is present, as the 'true bond that holds the World together.'⁷

The eucharist, because it exemplifies the fusion of divine and human principles in the world, 'belongs to an order of its own among the sacraments'.⁸ Crucially, it is not simply the communicant who receives the host, but Christ who, in the host, receives the communicant. Teilhard states:

The bread of the Eucharist is stronger than our flesh; that is why it is the bread that assimilates us, and not we the bread, when we receive it.⁹

He prays to God:

Your life is so much stronger than ours that it dominates us, absorbs us, and assimilates us to itself.... Although I might have imagined that it was I who held the consecrated Bread and gave myself its nourishment, I now see with blinding clarity that it is the Bread that takes hold of me and draws me to itself.¹⁰

It is unsatisfactory, therefore, to regard the host—and now, more often than not, the chalice—as no more than a kind of sacred object passed between clergy and people. This theology amounts to a denial of the decisive transformative action which Christ effects on the world by means of the eucharist. Teilhard finds these intuitions confirmed in the eucharistic theology of Gregory of

Nyssa. Gregory, inspired by the image of a little yeast raising an entire batch of dough, inverts the visible power relations between the human body and the eucharistic body in the following description of the eucharistic host:

That body to which immortality has been given it by God, when it is in ours, translates and transmutes the whole into itself.... The immortal Body, by being within that which receives it, changes the whole to its own nature.... The mere framework of our body possesses nothing belonging to itself that is cognizable by us, to hold it together, but remains in existence owing to a force that is introduced into it.¹¹

Immediately after receiving and ‘consuming’ the Host, Teilhard states that ‘although the Bread I had just eaten had become flesh of my flesh, nevertheless *it remained outside of me*’.¹² A revealing analogous point about God’s embracing of human nature is made succinctly by Paul Helm: ‘In the Incarnation God the Son does not become something that he was not, but assumes humanity into Godhead.’¹³ This reminds us just how intimately Teilhard’s eucharistic theology is related to and continuous with his cosmic christology, in which Jesus Christ is not only the carpenter of Nazareth but also ‘the Alpha and the Omega, the principle and the end, the foundation stone and the keystone, the Plenitude and the Plenifier ... the one who consummates all things and gives them their consistence’.¹⁴

Eucharist and the world

Christian practice often fails to recognize the cosmic setting of the eucharist. There exists, in Teilhard’s words, a critical danger of ‘over-refined piety’ which has ‘lost contact with the real’.¹⁵ He suggests that every particular eucharist is an instance of what Hans Urs von Balthasar describes as a *cosmic liturgy*,¹⁶ providing his own description of this act in the following striking passage:

When the priest says the words ‘This is my body’, his words fall directly on to the bread and directly transform it into the individual reality of Christ. But the great sacramental operation does not cease at that local and momentary event.... Throughout the life of each one of us and the life of the Church, and the history of the world—there is only one Mass and only one Communion.... The continuity of a unique act is split up and fixed, in space and time, for our experience. In fact, from the beginning of the messianic preparation, up till the Parousia, passing through the historic manifestation of Jesus and the phases of growth of his Church, a single event has been developing in the world: the Incarnation, realized, in each individual, through the Eucharist.¹⁷

Individual acts of communion do not replace, but are instances of, this single, unbroken communion, in which their full meaning and significance inheres. Teilhard, as well as regarding

the eucharist as an uninterrupted, everlasting corporate act, envisions a continuity between the particular material elements employed in its celebration and the matter of the world as a whole:

In a secondary and generalized sense, but in a true sense, the sacramental Species are formed by the totality of the world, and the duration of the creation is the time needed for its consecration.¹⁸

In the eucharist, the elements offered at the altar by humankind are consecrated and returned as a gift. In this act, a portion of the material world is also offered, renewed and returned.

The priest's words therefore possess a twofold reference in which the consecration of the host is inalienably coupled with a wider blessing of the persons and other beings who comprise the natural order so that they may also be transformed by the action of Christ:

When the phrase 'This is my body' is pronounced, 'this' means primarily the bread; but secondarily, in a second phase occurring in nature, the matter of the sacrament is the world, throughout which there spreads, so to complete itself, the superhuman presence of the universal Christ. The world is the final, and the real, Host into which Christ gradually descends, until his time is fulfilled.

The priestly act extends beyond the transubstantiated Host to the cosmos itself, which, century after century, is gradually being transformed by the Incarnation, itself never complete. From age to age, there is but one single mass in the world: the true Host, the total Host, is the universe which is continually being more intimately penetrated and vivified by Christ.¹⁹

The eucharist is an unceasing operation by which Christ enters into the world ever more fully, and is completed only in the final consummation of the world by Christ, who is the instrument, the centre and the end of the whole of animate and material creation, through whom everything is created, sanctified, and vivified.²⁰

The language of Leibniz and Blondel is clearly present in Teilhard's two most important essays on the eucharist: *The Priest* (1918) and *The Mass on the World* (1923). It is noteworthy that the first essay was produced more than a year before Blondel composed his paper to Teilhard previously quoted. This shows that Teilhard had assimilated Blondelian philosophy prior to his correspondence with Blondel, and almost certainly before the start of his wartime service. In *The Mass on the World*, Teilhard states of creatures that 'all are so dependent on a single central reality that a true life, borne in common by them all, gives them ultimately their consistence and their unity'. This single, omnipresent reality is Christ, 'in whom all things subsist'.²¹ In some other places, however, Teilhard suggests that the eucharist involves a transformation of not only the substance of the world but of its accidents as well. In *The Priest*, he prays to God:

You have allowed me to overcome the illusion of appearances so that now I cannot look at things without seeing, both before and after their fragmentation (more real than, and yet subsequent to their multiplicity), the welding of the substantial bond—the soul of desire that is already constituting its essence.²²

Teilhard describes his profound awareness of the cosmic significance of the eucharist in similarly perceptual terms in an early short story in the style of R.H. Benson. The subject of the narrative is described as a friend, but it is clear that the ‘friend’ is actually Teilhard himself. He perceives, whilst kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament, that ‘through the mysterious expansion of the host the whole world had become incandescent, had itself become like a single giant host’.²³ This appears to be a clear step beyond the position of Blondel, and of classic Tridentine eucharist theology, according to which the accidents remain the same whilst only the substance changes.

Transubstantiation?

The largest question about whether or not the eucharistic doctrine which Teilhard develops can accurately be classified as transubstantiation focuses on the relation of the eucharistic substance to other substances in the world. Teilhard’s eucharistic theology shares many features with a more ancient one which prevailed prior to what Andrew Louth describes as the ‘collapse of the notion of sacred space’.²⁴ The doctrine of transubstantiation developed as a reaction to the new cosmology that was emerging, as an attempt to provide an account of the now problematic and unique nature of consecrated eucharistic substance as distinct from ‘ordinary’ *non*-sacred space and substance. The type of eucharistic theology espoused by Gregory of Nyssa suggests that transubstantiation, far from being an invention of the late middle ages, is in fact the remnant of a more ancient cosmology. It is this sacralized cosmology which Teilhard wishes to recover.

A second dimension to consider is Teilhard’s use of eucharistic language when referring to the incarnation, which he describes as a ‘close bond linking all the movements of this world’.²⁵ Just as the person of Christ bears, in Chalcedonian terms, ‘two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation’, so the eucharist is composed of a phenomenal, observable entity, and the body of Christ. This analogy between incarnation and eucharist raises just as many questions as it resolves, however. In particular, a classic understanding of the eucharistic species as transubstantiated, and the substance of the bread and wine as illusory, seems to correspond with a Docetic christology according to which Christ’s humanity is merely an appearance veiling a spiritual body. The discontinuity which the doctrine of transubstantiation posits when one substance is eliminated and replaced by another is absent in Teilhard’s theology, however. In the transformation of substance that Teilhard

describes, the original matter of the substance remains following the transformation. His conception of eucharistic change cannot, therefore, strictly be described as transubstantiation, even though Teilhard employs this term in places. Neither can it be equated with consubstantiation, in which Christ becomes present in conjunction with a persisting substance. This is because no other bond of substance exists, in fact, apart from Christ.

Thirdly, Teilhard provides another twist to standard eucharistic theology with his theology of perception: Christ transfigures the world by making his transforming action on it clearly perceivable. The world as seen by the person of faith assumes a numinous or sacramental quality. I have shown elsewhere how the notion that faith involves the transformation of human perception of the world is fundamental to Teilhard's theology, even though it has been given little attention by previous commentators.²⁶ It is therefore possible to speak of a transformation of the accidents of eucharistic substance, which is the main point that the classic doctrine of transubstantiation denies. Teilhard states that transubstantiation 'is encircled by a halo of divinization—real, even though less intense—that extends to the whole universe'.²⁷ He depicts this 'halo' by means of striking light metaphors. In *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard describes its *éclat* (brilliance), *brille* (shine) and *incandescence*. It is *éblouissant* (dazzling), *lumineuse*, *limpide*, and like a *rayon* (ray of light). In an earlier work, he sees the universe 'bathed in light'.²⁸ Fire and conflagration imagery also capture Teilhard's imagination: humanity lives, he affirms, 'steeped' in the 'burning layers' of the divine and in its 'living light'. Elsewhere, he refers simply to the 'universe ablaze'.²⁹

These are three good reasons to desist from describing Teilhard's theology of eucharistic transformation as transubstantiation. Although he frequently employs the word, in a retreat note written shortly before his death he concedes that 'in the Eucharist, the principal point in question is no longer "transubstantiation" in the old sense of the word (the substitution of one matter for another) [but] "Pléromisation"'³⁰, by which he means the bringing of the fullness of Christ into the world. In Teilhard's account of the eucharistic transformation of matter, it is the *strength* and *appearance* of the bond of substance that change.

Communion in action

Thomas Merton states that only in 'priestly and eucharistic perspectives can we really understand the great work of Teilhard de Chardin and his profound sympathy for everything human and for every legitimate aspiration of modern man'.³¹ Teilhard regards priesthood, both lay and ordained, as essentially a ministry of eucharistic transformative action. The consecration of the eucharist which the priest performs represents the transformations which all Christians, in their different types of work, bring to the world, whether in manufacturing, research, service,

caring, artistic creativity, or other enterprises. This conviction explains Teilhard's arresting representation of the soldiers on the First World War battlefields as priests: they are engaged in a supremely active and sacrificial commission.³² Teilhard is determined to articulate the importance of human action for the communion of the person with God, portraying it as a kind of eucharistic consecration of that which it touches:

In action, first of all, I adhere to the creative power of God; I coincide with it; I become not only its instrument but its living extension. And as there is nothing more personal in beings than their will, I merge myself, in a sense, through my heart, with the very heart of God. This contact is continuous because I am always acting.³³

Human action is, like the eucharist, a real, concrete part of the transformative restoration of the world in Christ: Teilhard states:

It is through the collaboration which he stimulates in us that Christ, starting from all created things, is consummated and attains his plenitude.... We may, perhaps, imagine that the creation was finished long ago. But this would be quite wrong. It continues still more magnificently, and at the highest levels of the world. 'The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.' And we serve to complete it, even by the humblest work of our hands. This is, ultimately, the meaning and value of our acts.³⁴

The liberal protestant view that any religious truth which cannot be explained in human and naturalistic terms needs to be deconstructed until this can be done is alive and well in current practical theology. Excessively dogmatic notions of particular Christian truths are also flourishing. What is less prominent, however, is the creative use of historic Christian doctrine and symbolism to inspire the faith and mission of the church by capturing the imagination of wider society. Teilhard provides the church with resources for such a task, and his eucharistic cosmology is one example of these. He does not seek to diminish the classic Christian mysteries, but shows how they will always continue to express and complete the dignity, drama and grandeur of the life lived in Christ.

How does the theology of the assimilation of humanity into Christ fare in current Church of England liturgy? The traditional Prayer of Humble Access, which appeared in the 1549 Prayer Book, is preserved in *Common Worship* Order One along with its hope 'that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us'. Nevertheless, the alternative prayer provided on the same page reverses this order in expressing the desire 'that he may live in us and we in him'.³⁵ In so far as order of exposition is suggestive of theological priorities, we must also pray that this innovation does not foster the notion that humanity is somehow able to contain Christ.

David Grumett is the author of *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity and Cosmos*, Leuven: Peeters, 2005.

3,720 words, including endnotes.

¹ Gottfried Leibniz, letter of 20 September 1712, in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), p. 607.

² Gottfried Leibniz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.20 (London: Macmillan, 1896), pp. 611–12.

³ Letters to Antoine Arnauld, 1671, in *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C.I. Gerhardt, I (7 vols; Hildesheim: Olms, 1978), p. 75; and to Des Bosses, 10 October 1712, in *Philosophischen Schriften*, II, p. 461.

⁴ Maurice Blondel, *Une énigme historique : le ‘vinculum substantiale’ d’après Leibniz et l’ébauche d’un réalisme supérieur* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1930), pp. 130–31, emphasis added.

⁵ Blondel, *Une énigme historique*, p. 83.

⁶ Maurice Blondel, paper of 5 December 1919, in *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin – Maurice Blondel: Correspondence* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1976), p. 23.

⁷ ‘The Mystical Milieu’, in *Writings in Time of War* (London: Collins, 1968), p. 142.

⁸ ‘Introduction to the Christian Life’, in *Christianity and Evolution* (San Diego: Harvest, 1974), p. 165.

⁹ ‘My Universe’, in *Science and Christ* (London: Collins, 1968), p. 76.

¹⁰ ‘The Priest’, in *Writings in Time of War*, pp. 210, 214–15, amended translation.

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, § 37, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series II, V (14 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 504–506; cf. I Cor 5.6.

¹² ‘The Pyx’, in ‘Christ in the World of Matter’, in *Hymn of the Universe* (London: Collins, 1965), p. 51.

¹³ Paul Helm, ‘Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of the Two Standpoints’, in *Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p. 46.

¹⁴ ‘Science and Christ’, in *Science and Christ*, pp. 34–35; cf. Rv 22.13, Col 1.17.

¹⁵ ‘The Sense of Humanity’, in *Toward the Future* (San Diego: Harvest, 1975), p. 38.

¹⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003).

¹⁷ *The Divine Milieu*, pp. 85–86.

¹⁸ *The Divine Milieu*, p. 88.

¹⁹ ‘My Universe’, p. 65; ‘Pantheism and Christianity’, in *Christianity and Evolution*, pp. 73–74.

²⁰ ‘Cosmic Life’, in *Writings in Time of War*, p. 58.

²¹ ‘The Mass on the World’, in *The Heart of Matter* (London: Collins, 1978), p. 124; cf. Col 1.17.

²² ‘The Priest’, p. 205.

²³ ‘The Monstrance’, in ‘Christ in the World of Matter’, in *Hymn of the Universe*, p. 48.

²⁴ Andrew Louth, ‘The Body in Western Catholic Christianity’, in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 124.

²⁵ *The Divine Milieu* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), p. 25.

²⁶ David Grumett, *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity and Cosmos* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), ch. 5.

²⁷ ‘The Priest’, p. 207.

²⁸ ‘My Universe’, p. 74.

²⁹ *The Divine Milieu*, pp. 73–74; ‘The Mass on the World’, pp. 21–29.

³⁰ Retreat notes of 27 September – 8 October 1953, in *Notes de retraites, 1919–1954* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 338.

³¹ Thomas Merton, ‘The Universe as Epiphany’, in *Love and Living*, eds. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (London: Sheldon, 1979), p. 183.

³² ‘The Priest’, p. 223.

³³ *The Divine Milieu*, p. 21.

³⁴ *The Divine Milieu*, p. 20; cf. Rom 8.22.

³⁵ *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), p. 181.